



Wednesday, January 22, 2003 Paducah, Kentucky

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Goal: Get Kentucky farmers online

A \$48,750 grant to a consulting firm run by a former Heath resident will go to help especially tobacco farmers.

By **Joe Walker** jwalker@paducahsun.com--
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A nonprofit consulting firm run by former Heath resident Dr. Linda Johnson hopes to open the doors of electronic business to farming statewide.

Johnson is president of the Bowling Green-based Center for Information Technology Enterprise, which will use a new \$48,750 grant to lay groundwork for the proposed project. The center will "do the architecture" for the Rural e-Learning Agricultural Program (REAP), which could ultimately bring computers, high-speed Internet access and online learning to the many farms that still don't have the technology, she said.

The program is particularly geared to roughly 45,000 tobacco-growing farming families who are dealing with deep quota cuts. To help growers find alternatives to tobacco, the General Assembly has invested more than \$98 million in tobacco settlement money in a variety of initiatives including REAP.

"This is a very small step in putting a computer on every farming table, a broadband connection to the Internet and a learning portal to help those families understand what's going on worldwide," Johnson said.

She said the Progressive Policy Institute, a

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Washington, D.C., think tank that compares the new-economy progress of states, rates Kentucky last in the nation in percentage of farms that are online. The Kentucky Agricultural Development Board took that into account in writing a strategic plan for farm growth and in approving the grant, Johnson said.

"There was plenty of space in the strategic plan devoted to the notion that farming families and the ag community need to be computer literate and have educational opportunities beyond existing institutions," she said.

Sam Lawson, a member of the development board, said REAP is designed to increase farm income by education through a Web "super-site." Johnson said the center will develop a model including cost, availability of help from public and private resources, and what the program "would look like" if widespread financial support were found.

REAP is consistent with a center goal of increasing broadband availability across Kentucky, particularly in rural areas, she said.

Meanwhile, the center has formed a partnership with the Kentucky Office of the New Economy, the Local Government Development Fund and the Kentucky Manufacturing Assistance Center to help further electronic business development statewide.

The group is conducting 12 free workshops through March in various Kentucky cities, including Jan. 30 at J.R.'s Executive Inn in Paducah; Feb. 11 at the Murray State University Education Center in Hopkinsville; and March 6 at the MSU Regional Special Events Center in Murray. Each workshop starts at 7:30 a.m. with registration and a continental breakfast and runs from 8 to 10:30 a.m.

Among other things, participants will learn about state and federal funding to help start and develop Internet business. Johnson said the workshops are meant for people who run

companies who want to know more about increasing revenue, expanding or reducing cost through use of the Internet.

For information or to register, contact the center Web site at citeinc.com. Other means of registering are: toll-free, 800-879-1150; fax, 724-224-5317; e-mail, registration@rusmart.com.

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